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ABSTRACT

A study examined the role of social support in the mother's adjustment to the birth of a child by drawing on data collected during interviews with 204 mothers when their infants were 1 and 6 months old. (This data was drawn from a longitudinal study of 1,300 children.) At each interview mothers completed questionnaires about their adjustment to parenting. It was found that mothers living in an extended family reported receiving more help and support than mothers in a nuclear family. While help and support in the first month is not directly related to parental adjustment at 6 months, it is indirectly related. Help and support contribute to the mother feeling less restricted by the demands of parenthood at 1 month, which, in turn, is related to her feeling less restricted at 6 months. Mothers who do not receive adequate help and support at 1 month are more likely to feel restricted at 1 month, and these feelings are likely to continue at 6 months. (MDM)

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SOCIAL SUPPORT AND ADJUSTMENT TO THE BIRTH OF A CHILD

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BACKGROUND

This paper examines the role of social support in the mother's adjustment to the birth of a child, a potentially stressful event. A large body of research has established the importance of social support to successful coping with stressful events. This paper examines the level of social support for mothers of newborns, and the relationship of social support to the mother's adjustment to parenting.

While most people believe that a child's birth is a special, and emotionally significant event, there is debate over whether it is a similar adjustment for all women. For instance, some argue that the birth of the first child, which brings with it the new role of "parent", is more stressful than is the birth of later children, because the woman must develop a new identity as a parent, as well as learn new skills and use different aspects of her self. Others argue that the birth of any child, with the physical labor and challenges that accompany it, the responsibility for an unstable, immature being, the sleepless nights, and so on, requires similar levels of coping from all mothers.

There is also debate about the role of social support as a moderator of stressful events -- some studies have found that support is important only when people are under stress, other studies have found that support is important, regardless of the levels of stress. For mothers of newborns, this question becomes, is help and support in the first month more crucial for mothers in special circumstances? Mothers whose adjustment to parenting might arguably be more difficult are mothers who had health problems during or following childbirth, mothers whose babies have had health problems or whose babies have particularly "difficult" temperaments, and mothers who are "at risk" for various problems because they are poor, single or young.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

* HOW MUCH HELP AND SUPPORT DO MOTHERS OF NEWBORNS RECEIVE?

* DO SOME MOTHERS GET MORE SUPPORT THAN OTHERS?

* ARE THESE DIFFERENCES IN HELP AND SUPPORT RELATED TO DIFFERENCES IN ADJUSTMENT TO PARENTING?

* IS SUPPORT IN THE FIRST MONTH MORE IMPORTANT TO FIRST-TIME MOTHERS?

* IS SUPPORT IN THE FIRST MONTH MORE IMPORTANT TO MOTHERS "AT RISK"?

* IS SUPPORT IN THE FIRST MONTH MORE IMPORTANT TO MOTHERS WHO HAD C-SECTIONS OR PROBLEMS DURING OR AFTER DELIVERY?

* IS SUPPORT IN THE FIRST MONTH MORE IMPORTANT TO MOTHERS WHOSE BABIES HAVE HEALTH PROBLEMS, EITHER AT BIRTH OR IN THE FIRST MONTH, OR A DIFFICULT TEMPERAMENT?

* DOES THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORT IN THE FIRST MONTH LAST BEYOND ONE MONTH?

METHODS

The data for this paper come from the NICHD Study of Early Child Care, which is a prospective, longitudinal study of the impact of experiences in the first year, especially experiences with nonmaternal care, on children's development. The NICHD Study follows 1300 children from birth to age 3. These children live in 10 different areas of the country, and were recruited randomly from all full-term, healthy babies born in area hospitals. The sample of families was restricted to English-speaking mothers age 18 and older. This paper draws on data from 75% of the children at two sites: the Philadelphia area and the Boston area.

MEASURES: This paper uses data collected during interviews with the mothers when the infants were one-month and six-months old. At each interview, mothers completed questionnaires about their adjustment to parenting. We measured adjustment to parenting using three subscales from Abidin's (1983) Parenting Stress Index: Sense of Competence; Attachment to the Child; and Restrictions of the Role; Table 2 presents sample items from this measure. At 1-month, mothers completed a series of 10 items about help with the baby and the household since returning home from the hospital, emotional support from friends and family, and overall satisfaction with the level of help and support received in the first month. Scores on these items range from 1 = hardly ever to 3 = 2-4 days/week to 5 = daily. The items were summed to create a total scale score, where a high score equals high levels of help and support.

RESULTS

1. HOW MUCH HELP AND SUPPORT DO MOTHERS RECEIVE? -- See Table 1

2. DO SOME MOTHERS GET MORE SUPPORT THAN OTHERS? -- See Table 3

The only consistent differences in the level of help and support are: 1) whether this is the mother's first child; and 2) whether the mother is living in an extended family -- most often, these mothers are younger, single mothers, living with their own parents. Mothers living in an extended family report more help and support.

3. ARE THESE DIFFERENCES IN HELP AND SUPPORT RELATED TO DIFFERENCES IN ADJUSTMENT TO PARENTING?

Table 4 shows the results of regression analyses. Each regression controlled for site, birth order, mother's age, poverty status (measured by receipt of AFDC or food stamps), single mother status, mother's health (problems during childbirth, or a c-section), baby's temperament, and baby's health since birth (complications at birth or less than excellent health since birth).

Lack of help and support in the first month is significantly associated with feeling restricted by the demands of caring for a newborn.

4. IS SUPPORT IN THE FIRST MONTH MORE IMPORTANT TO FIRST TIME MOTHERS?

We tested this question statistically, by adding the interaction term, support by birth order, to the model, and found that there is no difference between first-time mothers and other mothers -- help and support is equally important to both groups.

5. IS SUPPORT IN THE FIRST MONTH MORE IMPORTANT TO MOTHERS "AT RISK"?

We found no differences. Help and support is important to young, poor, single mothers, but it is equally important to 30-year-old, middle-class, married mothers.

6. IS SUPPORT IN THE FIRST MONTH MORE IMPORTANT TO MOTHERS WHO HAD C-SECTIONS OR PROBLEMS DURING OR AFTER DELIVERY?

We found no differences between these mothers and other mothers.

7. IS SUPPORT IN THE FIRST MONTH MORE IMPORTANT TO MOTHERS WHOSE BABIES HAVE HEALTH PROBLEMS, EITHER AT BIRTH OR IN THE FIRST MONTH, OR A DIFFICULT TEMPERAMENT?

We found no differences in the relationship between support and parental adjustment for mothers of babies with health problems and mothers of babies in excellent health.

We did find differences for mothers of babies with difficult temperaments (see Table 4). Support is important to all mothers, but it is even more important to mothers of difficult babies. At lower levels of support, mothers of difficult babies feel more restricted by the demands of parenthood than do mothers of easy babies. However, at high levels of support, mothers of difficult babies are similar to mothers of easy babies. Both groups feel less restricted at higher levels of support.

8. DOES THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORT IN FIRST MONTH LAST BEYOND ONE-MONTH?

Table 5 shows the regression analyses to test the relationship of help and support in the first month with parental adjustment when the baby is 6-months old. Adjustment at 1-month is a significant predictor of adjustment at 6-months. Help and support at 1-month is not.

CONCLUSION

The information from this study indicates that lack of help and support is a significant predictor of a mother's feeling restricted by the demands of caring for a newborn.

In addition, we found that help and support are important to all mothers, not just to first-time mothers, mothers "at risk" because of poverty, age or marital status, or mothers with health problems or with babies who had health problems. This suggests that the month following childbirth is a time when all mothers are making an adjustment to the responsibility of caring for a newborn. Such basic support as help with baby care, help with household chores, and someone to talk to, contributes to a healthy adjustment to parenting.

While help and support in the first month is not directly related to parental adjustment at 6-months, it is indirectly related -- help and support contribute to a mother feeling less restricted by the demands of parenthood at one-month, which, in turn, is related to her feeling less restricted at 6-months. Mothers who don't receive adequate help and support at 1-month are more likely to feel restricted at one-month, and these feelings are likely to continue at 6-months.

TABLE 1: WHAT KIND OF HELP AND SUPPORT DO NEW MOTHERS RECEIVE?

	Daily	5-6 days a week	2-4 days a week	Once a week	Less than once a week
1. In the first month, someone other than the mother:					
fed the baby	29%	4%	16%	6%	45%
changed the baby's diapers	44%	8%	19%	12%	18%
watched the baby while mom did something for herself, like take a shower or a nap	35%	16%	29%	12%	8%
watched the baby when mom was not around	17%	7%	22%	34%	20%
cooked a meal	15%	18%	33%	14%	19%
did some housework	17%	12%	26%	20%	27%
watched older children (if any)	29%	11%	25%	19%	16%
2. How often seen/talked to friends/family, other than husband/partner	51%	24%	18%	6%	1%

	Very Often	Often	Sometimes	Once in awhile	Hardly ever
3. When you have had a question or worry about your baby, or about taking care of your baby, has there been someone you could talk to?	68%	22%	8%	1%	2%

	Very Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
4. Overall, how satisfied have you been with the help and support you've gotten since coming home?	70%	26%	3%	2%

TABLE 2: SAMPLE ITEMS FROM ADJUSTMENT TO PARENTING MEASURE

FEELING COMPETENT AS A PARENT

1. Being a parent is harder than I thought it would be.

2. I feel capable and on top of things when I am caring for my baby.

3. I have had many more problems caring for my baby than I expected.

4. I often have the feeling that I cannot handle things very well.

5. I feel that I am:
   a. A very good parent.
   b. A better than average parent.
   c. An average parent.
   d. A person who has some trouble being a parent.
   e. Not very good at being a parent.

ATTACHMENT TO THE BABY

1. I expected to have closer and warmer feelings for my baby than I do and this bothers me.

2. Sometimes my baby does things that bother me just to be mean.

3. My baby knows I am his or her parent and wants me more than other people.

4. How easy is it for you to understand what your child wants or needs?
   a. Very easy.
   b. Easy.
   c. Somewhat difficult.
   d. It is very hard.
   e. I usually can't figure out what the problem is.

FEELING RESTRICTED BY THE ROLE

1. Most of my life is spent doing things for my baby.

2. I find myself giving up more of my life to meet my baby's needs than I ever expected.

3. I feel trapped by my responsibilities as a parent.

4. I often feel that my baby's needs control my life.

5. Since having a baby I feel that I am almost never able to do things that I like to do.

TABLE 3: DO SOME MOTHERS GET MORE SUPPORT THAN OTHERS?

Maternal Characteristics	N	Mean Support	t
First Child	94	3.51	
Later Child	110	3.26	-2.40 *
Mother aged 18-29	98	3.37	
Mother aged 30-39	106	3.39	NS
Lives with Extended Family	23	3.52	
Lives in Nuclear Family	181	3.36	NS [1]
Family Income Under $45,000	119	3.35	
Family Income of $45,000 or more	85	3.41	NS
Mother is White	168	3.35	
Mother is Minority	36	3.53	NS
Mother had C-section	36	3.44	
Mother had vaginal birth	168	3.36	NS
Mother had problems after birth	38	3.48	
Mother did not have problems	166	3.35	NS
Baby is a boy	103	3.40	
Baby is a girl	101	3.35	NS
Baby in excellent health	133	3.43	
Baby in less than excellent health	71	3.27	NS
Mother nursing at 1-month	114	3.33	
Mother not nursing at 1-month	90	3.44	NS
Living with husband/partner	180	3.40	
Single mother	24	3.20	NS
Boston area	103	3.29	
Philadelphia area	101	3.47	NS

* $p < .05$

[1] In a regression including all these variables, $R2=.10$, $p < .05$. Mothers having their first child and mothers living with extended family received more support (standardized estimates of beta = .16, $p < .05$, and .21, $p < .05$, respectively).

TABLE 4: DOES HELP AND SUPPORT IN THE FIRST MONTH MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

	PARENTING ADJUSTMENT AT 1 MONTH		
	FEELING INCOMPETENT	ATTACHMENT PROBLEMS	FEELING RESTRICTED
Site (1=Boston,2=Phila)	.16 *	.13	.02
First child	.31 ***	.14	.10
Mother's age	.01	.08	.04
Poverty	.11	.07	-.05
Single mother	-.08	.06	-.01
Mother's health	-.08	.02	-.04
Difficult temperament	.20 **	.05	.26 ***
Baby's health problems	.08	.17 *	.06
Support in 1st month	-.04	-.02	-.25 ***
Support x Temperament	-	-	-.15 *
R2	.17 ***	.08	.16 ***
N	204	204	204

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

TABLE 5: DOES IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORT IN THE FIRST MONTH LAST BEYOND THE FIRST MONTH?

	PARENTING ADJUSTMENT AT 6 MONTHS		
	FEELING INCOMPETENT	ATTACHMENT	FEELING RESTRICTED
Adjustment at 1 month	.62 ***	.57 ***	.49 ***
Site (1=Boston,2=Phila)	.01	.01	.06
First child	-.09	-.01	-.08
Mother's age	-.03	-.15 *	.05
Poverty	.03	.00	.01
Single mother	.08	-.01	.02
Mother's health at 1-mnth	.10	.04	.13 *
Difficult temperament	.09	-.06	.01
Baby's health at 1-mnth	.12 *	.04	.19 **
Support in 1st month	-.06	-.04	-.12
R2	.45 ***	.36 ***	.37 ***
N	204	204	204

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$